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SUBJECT: RESULTS REPORT: EXPERTS REFUTE MEDIA SCEPTIC'S CLAIMS ON BIOTECHNOLOGY; MPP GOALS: EP-ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND SECURITY

¶11. Activity: Four experts attending a USAID biotechnology conference answered local reporters' questions on genetically modified (GM) food at an Embassy-organized media roundtable on November 17. An article the following day in a leading South African daily indicated the roundtable succeeded in challenging the often one-sided, negative reporting on biotechnology found in much of the local media.

¶12. Four journalists participated in the roundtable, including a reporter for The Star newspaper (daily circulation nearly 175,000) whose previous articles on the subject provided an uncritical platform for activists opposed to the use of GM food. During the roundtable, the Star reporter raised several questions challenging the use of GM organisms as unsafe for consumers and uneconomic for farmers, but the panelists convincingly refuted the premise behind each question. Her article the following day, while hardly unbiased, nonetheless represented the first time this reporter had given significant voice to supporters of GM food. Embassy Pretoria views this as a development that underlines the importance of proactively engaging critics of U.S. policy - in this case of reporters who are skeptical that agricultural biotechnology is an important tool in the fight against hunger in Africa.

¶13. Other journalists who attended represented the state-run radio broadcast corporation, South Africa's main Afrikaans-language daily and an English-language weekly for farmers. We expect feature reports from those journalists in the coming days/weeks.

¶14. Results: Encouraging. Although the roundtable generated only one immediate article, the event provided an important forum for South African journalists who report on GM food to interview some of Africa's most prominent and eloquent supporters of biotechnology. What they learned at the roundtable should infuse their reporting in the future, and they will be able to turn to these expert panelists as sources when they write on the subject in the future. Already, one journalist who had been unremittingly critical of GM food has for the first time given voice to Africans who support U.S. efforts to invest in agricultural biotechnology to fight hunger.

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